

Social-Emotional Learning 101

The idea that schools should play a role in developing students' social-emotional skills, in addition to their academic abilities, is gaining momentum. Schools and districts around the country are adopting practices that place a greater emphasis on boosting students' ability to understand and control their emotions and behavior, maintain healthy relationships, and believe in their ability to succeed. State education leaders, in turn, are considering [policy changes](#) to support this work.

While increased attention to students' social-emotional skills and well-being has the potential to benefit all students, some approaches carry significant risks, especially for those students who are already underserved by our education system: students from low-income families, students of color, and English learners. Approaches that [lack an explicit equity lens](#), that fail to acknowledge the role of students' racial and cultural experiences in social-emotional development, that treat social-emotional and academic learning as separate, or that fail to address the processes and structures in schools that disadvantage students of color, low-income students, and immigrant youths systemically may do more harm than good.

Education equity advocates can play a critical role in pushing school, district, and state leaders to approach this work in an equity-conscious way. This factsheet is meant to help do just that. It provides an introduction to key elements of social-emotional learning, highlights promises and pitfalls of this work, and suggests specific ways that district and school leaders can incorporate what we have gleaned from research on social-emotional development to create learning environments that help all students thrive.

What is social-emotional learning (SEL)? What's promising about it? What are the potential pitfalls?

The term social-emotional learning (SEL) is generally used to define efforts to promote a wide range of skills that address how people think about and control their own thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, as well as how they interact with other people. SEL is often [used synonymously with terms](#) such as non-cognitive skills, character skills, and 21st century skills. While there isn't a consensus on which skills are most important to student success, [common frameworks](#) emphasize competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, goal-directed behavior, responsible decision-making, and conflict resolution.

[Research shows](#) that these skills matter for academic, personal and career success, and that they are malleable — meaning they are not fixed traits. But it also shows that they are just one part of a complex picture of how students develop socially, emotionally, and academically — a picture that also includes **student and educator mindsets, beliefs, and behaviors, as well as the school and district systems and structures** that shape learning experiences and relationships.

All aspects of this picture are influenced by the realities of our society, including **both student and adult experiences with race and socioeconomic status**. Students of color, for example, often have to contend with disparaging remarks and experiences in school that send them subtle (and not-so-subtle) signals that they don't belong in the classroom, or that they can't master rigorous academic content — signals that their White, upper middle class peers are far less likely to receive. These remarks and experiences can hurt their motivation, self-esteem, and their confidence in their ability to succeed.

Changing these perceptions is **not** a matter of teaching students to feel differently about school, or how to behave — it's a matter of changing the **systems** and **structures** and **adult beliefs** and behaviors that sent the damaging messages in the first place. District and school leaders who choose to tackle these systems, beliefs, and behaviors head on have the potential to create learning environments that help all students thrive.

Unfortunately, emerging approaches in many places overemphasize the need to build students' social-emotional skills and underemphasize the need to change systems and adult beliefs and practices. Such approaches pose a number of risks, especially for students of color, low-income students, and immigrant youths, and may inadvertently undercut stated educational goals — by reinforcing stereotypes and justifying low expectations or sacrificing already scarce instructional time and creating learning environments that are the opposite of inclusive. Education equity advocates can and should help steer this work in ways that mitigate these risks and incorporate research to create positive change for students.

What does it mean to approach SEL through an equity lens?

To support the social-emotional development of *all students*, school and district leaders must first recognize that the experiences of students are not all the same. Approaching social-emotional learning through an equity lens entails purposefully changing the learning environment to support students' belonging, identity, and engagement. [This means](#):

- Starting with student [strengths, not deficits](#)
- Explicitly addressing adult beliefs and behaviors
- Using research on social-emotional development to promote rigorous learning; and
- Working to establish an [equitable, culturally sustaining learning environment](#) throughout the school and district

Starting with student strengths, not deficits

Conversations about how best to support the social-emotional development of students often tend to focus on all of the challenges they face and the skills they are “missing.” This framing is problematic because while all students could benefit from meaningful SEL supports, the students typically being discussed are students of color, low-income students, and English learners, who are already the targets of stereotypes about race and socioeconomic status. As well-meaning as the approach may be, this focus on student shortcomings rather than student strengths could inadvertently reinforce these deficit-oriented views of students and become another [justification for low expectations](#).

Efforts to support students' social-emotional growth should instead begin by recognizing the assets students bring to the classroom and figuring out how to build on them. [Low-income students](#), [students of color](#), and [English learners](#) possess myriad strengths, including, frequently, tremendous [resilience](#), self-awareness and metacognition, experience navigating and [code-switching](#) in different environments, strong family and community connections, multilingualism, and their cultural history and heritage. Schools and districts can and should leverage these strengths in the classroom by, for example, designing lessons that help students connect what they are learning to their lived experiences or allowing them to choose texts and project topics that they are passionate about. Outside the classroom, schools and districts should leverage community strengths by forging partnerships with local organizations that can offer additional supports (e.g., after-school programs), seeking feedback from students and families (e.g., via surveys or focus groups), and acting on that feedback.

Explicitly addressing adult beliefs and behaviors

Everyone, educators included, possesses [implicit bias](#) associated with race/ethnicity, language, class, immigrant status, or ability. Unchallenged, these biases can lead teachers to perceive one student's lack of participation as shyness and another's as disengagement; or one child's boisterousness as “excessive energy” and another's as defiance. Biases may [influence](#) what educators teach and how they interact with students — for example, making educators [more likely to discipline students of color](#) than White students for the same behaviors, or less likely to recommend students of color than White students for advanced classes. These choices and interactions, in turn, shape how students experience school — whether they feel engaged and connected or disengaged and unwelcome.

Any effort to support students' social-emotional development must help adults who work with students to recognize and reduce their own implicit biases, and consider how adults' decisions and actions might be informed by their own beliefs, as in the examples provided above. This support should be embedded and ongoing, with opportunities for classroom observations and feedback.

Leveraging research on social-emotional development to promote rigorous learning

Social-emotional development is often seen as separate from academic learning. In reality, however, the two go hand in hand. Students will not learn rigorous content if they are not engaged — and research shows that students are [most engaged when they:](#)

- feel like they [belong](#) in their classroom,
- believe in their [ability to succeed](#),
- believe that they can improve by putting in effort (i.e., have a “[growth mindset](#)”), and
- understand the value of the work being done.

Teachers can foster engagement and support these mindsets by providing students with positive, rigorous learning experiences and making connections between classwork and students’ cultures, identities, and interests.

It’s also important to acknowledge the differences in students’ prior classroom experiences — which may, for example, have given the experiences, roles, and achievements of [people of color short shrift](#). Unless teachers make concerted efforts to make courses culturally inclusive, students of color may continue to feel marginalized. It is easier to engage students when they can see themselves reflected in the lessons.

Strategies for developing positive academic mindsets include, but aren’t limited to:

- Establishing [predictable norms and routines](#) that foster respectful relationships among students and teachers as well as between students and teachers
- [Communicating clear, high expectations](#) (e.g., by sharing examples of high-quality work) and expressing confidence that students can reach those expectations
- [Providing frequent, concrete feedback and opportunities to improve](#)/revise work and helping students see mistakes as part of the learning process
- Helping students see themselves in the work both via culturally relevant content and through explicit connections between content and students’ interests and experiences
- [Providing opportunities](#) for students to bring their own ideas, experiences, and opinions into assignments and collaborate with peers

Establishing an equitable, culturally sustaining learning environment throughout the school and district

A teacher who creates a positive classroom learning environment can only get so far with students, absent similar experiences in other classes and with peers. What’s more, students who are hungry, unable to see the board, or lack a safe home environment may be misdiagnosed as having “social-emotional difficulties.” But thoughtful policies and practices throughout a district and school, combined with [wraparound services](#) to meet student needs, can help turn schools into truly inclusive learning communities replete with opportunities for social-emotional and academic growth of all students.

To support students’ social emotional development, district and school leaders must revisit a wide range of policies and structures to bolster the sense of belonging for students of color, English learners, and students from low-income families — who too often receive the message that they *aren’t* welcome and *don’t* belong.

Potential policy/practice changes may include, but aren't limited to:

- Reviewing disaggregated results from school culture and climate surveys on an ongoing basis and addressing areas of weakness
- Adopting inclusive policies, such as codes of conduct (including hair and [dress codes](#)) that ensure students are able to express themselves and their identities without punishment
- Adopting [discipline policies and practices](#) that focus on repairing and sustaining relationships between individuals when conflict occurs
- Providing professional development and coaching on culturally sustaining practices and reducing implicit bias
- Adopting curriculum procurement policies that emphasize cultural relevancy and diversity *alongside* academic rigor
- Establishing early warning systems to identify and provide support to students who are falling behind or becoming disengaged
- Ensuring that there are sufficient support staff — including [school counselors](#), social workers, and school psychologists — to allow for reasonable caseloads
- Ensuring that there is purposeful and ongoing communication with families and the community — not just when there is a problem — and that translators are available
- Establishing strong systemic connections to community-based organizations to provide mental and physical health supports beyond the school day, as well as high-quality after school opportunities
- Establishing fast-response wraparound services teams that connect students with services to meet individual needs

All policy changes must be made with continuous input from students, families, and community advocates. School culture and climate surveys that yield disaggregated results by student race/ethnicity, income, English learner, and ability status can be used to start conversations with community members about what schools and districts should do to improve educational experiences for these students.

For further reading, see:

[Pursuing Social and Emotional Development Through a Racial Equity Lens: A Call to Action by The Aspen Institute, 2018](#)

[Equity & Social and Emotional Learning: A Cultural Analysis by Robert J. Jagers, Deborah Rivas-Drake, and Teresa Borowski, 2018](#)

[Supporting Social, Emotional, & Academic Development by UChicago Consortium on School Research, 2018](#)

[Ensuring a Positive School Climate and Culture by The Education Trust, 2018](#)